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THE JOY OF THE THEATRE

GILBERT CANNAN

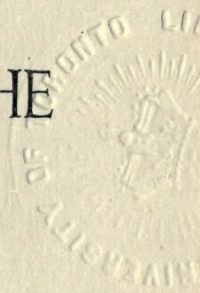
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FELLOWSHIP BOOKS

Edited by Mary Stratton

THE JOY OF THE THEATRE



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By Gilbert Cannan



401403
25.3.42

Published by B. T. Batsford. London

"THE highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies & antipathies, the knowledge of itself, in proportion to which knowledge every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant & kind. If dogmas can do more it is well: but a drama is no fit place for the enforcement of them".

I

IN writing of the theatre of our time he who would choose such a title might fairly be suspected of irony, for in what theatre in England or the English-speaking world shall joy be found? Yet a sturdy hope weaves the two words into one sentence on the threshold of a book, that they may meet again in men's minds and, in due course, bring the things themselves together. Men create everything in their own image and always get exactly what they deserve, neither more nor less. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children in art as in everything else, and the English nation deserves the English

theatre. That, however, is no reason why such a theatre should be endured, and there are signs that it will not much longer be suffered to continue unchanged. All over the world it is being discovered that what was good enough for the fathers is not good enough for the children, and a generation is springing into manhood which demands the right to examine its heritage and to discard everything that it finds to be worthless, useless and injurious. This generation is discovering that it is possible to rebel against the sins of its forbears and it is rebelling with all its might. If in the delighted excitement of the struggle it rebels also against their virtues, experience will bring wisdom and keener perception, and the very violence of the revolt will clear the air and leave the next generation and the next and the next more free for constructive action. Meanwhile there has been and is perception enough to see that the life of men cannot be changed until a change has been wrought in their minds, and

to bring this about there is no other instrument than art. Religion without art is like a ship without sails. Education is the preparation of the human mind for the understanding of art and, through art, of life. Art is devised for the correction of those errors into which a man's senses lead him, errors which, uncorrected, gather into a crust upon his soul and prevent his entering into communication with his fellow-men. Good art dissolves such errors; bad art multiplies them. Bad art has always been used as an escape from life; good art admits of no escape and forces a man to see himself in a glass clearly. A bad man likes bad art, for good art shows him to himself as grotesque, and he flies from the reflection and does his best to procure the suppression of the artist, and fees unscrupulous men to show him a lying and flattering reflection. Fortunately there are no absolutely bad men, and the great secret society of the artists, the most powerful secret society in the world, because it is open and the master of time and death, has

been able wisely and surely to organize so that good art survives, while bad art is borne away on the backward movement of time. There is a constant succession of men bad enough—snobs, arrivists, speculators, egoists—to hold up the lying mirror of bad art, but ever the true mirror of good art wins more to turn to it and to see, as they gaze, all that they thought harsh and pitiless and cruel melt away to leave an image of pure beauty. This change is not in the mirror but in the minds of those who look, and once it has been brought about, they can no more fall back into those errors of the senses, towards deliverance from which the whole activity of mankind has from the very beginning been directed, and they move into the vanguard of the march towards the immortality of the free spirit of man. The constructive work of the world is directed by the artists. Scientists, inventors, engineers, manufacturers, organizers, even wholesale grocers, do their bidding, though they have no taste for poetry or painting or music or

sculpture and believe that the laws which govern their success or failure are purely economic. The business is always the outcome of the dream.

There was bound to come a point in human progress when the dream and the business should of moral necessity begin to approach each other more nearly, when such a degree of material liberty should be reached as would be intolerably empty without its complement of spiritual liberty, without, that is, the joy which is the outcome of those two liberties. It is of small immediate consequence to the man who is the slave of the business whether the dream be true or no. He had liefer be drugged with lies than made to see and feel his slavery, be it in poverty or in wealth. So long as a man is the victim of the tyranny of the necessary material work of the world, he cannot have the energy to desire the truth, and to appease the restricted and small appetite of his mind the sweetmeats of untruth will seem to suffice, though such

debauchery must bring its inevitable consequence of atrophy and spiritual death. On the other hand it is rarely that the diseased appetite is so far gone as to be beyond cure, and, outside the deliberate exploiters of humanity, there can be very few men who are impervious to the truth of art and the truth of life. ❧ Now, for the organization of the forces of truth there is one machine to hand, the theatre, in which, properly controlled, all the arts can find the freedom and the strength of co-operation. There is no other machine. The Churches long ago adopted the methods of the theatre in the performance of a series of symbolic plays, in which audience and actors, or congregation and priests, collaborate in worship of the Universal Presence. These performances, these symbolic plays, however, have become poisoned with dogma mechanically and unintelligently repeated, politics crystallized and formulated, and fixed ethical ideas. They have been debased, and not the Universal Presence but the symbol

is worshipped, and, for long enough, there has been no room in the Church for art, and such art as has been able to creep in has been screwed down to fit the Church's formula.

❧ Neither for long enough, and for similar reasons, has there been room for art in the theatre, where also the machinery consists of collaboration between audience and performers in worship, *i.e.* the creation of joy in the Universal Presence. In the theatre as in the Church the machinery is abused, and not joy, but animal laughter or sentimental tears only are created. The use of the machinery of both Church and theatre is inartistic and therefore irreligious. The one begets unwholesome fear and dread, the other frivolity and a spirit of mockery ; and fear and mockery make of human beings an easy prey to the forces of evil.

❧ In the present state of society everybody, except a few artists, is both exploiter and exploited, so that the energy of the human race runs in a vicious circle and is hardly at

all productive of sound achievement ; profits are estimated only in terms of money and every standard is falsified. The majority of men are mimetic and slaves, where they should be free and creative of love, joy, affection and friendship, of which great things, in their fight against evil, art is the by-product and undying memorial. The standards natural to mankind, the standards of our inborn joy, can only be restored by the artists, and by the artists in co-operation and in possession of an integral part of the social machine—either the Church or the theatre, or both. Social evolution follows the evolution of art. Hitherto it has followed at a distance, at the distance of several generations ; but a great change has come over the world. Hopes, beliefs, prejudices, ideas, that once sufficed for a whole generation, are now exhausted in five years. Men are excited, restless, busy, perturbed, certain of new conquests, yet impatient to appraise their value. We have entered the Promised Land. The

great men of the Victorian Age had a vision of it from Mount Nebo. We are still too thrilled with the delight and novelty of it all. We have renounced their vision and are occupied with detail, with the gardens, and the vineyards, and the partition of the land ; we are bewildered too to find that the processes of our existence are going on unchanged, bringing the same satisfactions and the same complications, the same joys and sorrows, as in the wilderness. We had hoped to find ourselves different and lo ! we are the same, only with a more urgent need of authority, a more imperative and crushing desire to discover the truth of ourselves, the extent of our capacity, and our exact relation to the powers that brought us to such might and dominion. We are being forced to admit the authority and the divine truth of art, to perceive that the inspiration of Beethoven, for instance, is no less authentic than that of Jesus of Nazareth and His Apostles. In such necessity, we can no longer be content with

a social evolution remotely dependent upon the evolution of art through the scattered efforts of artists working in isolation and wretchedness. We are forced to turn to them for joy and enlightenment and discipline, for all that feeds and sustains our imagination. It is not enough for us to turn individually, each man seeking out this book or that picture. We live in herds ; our joy must be collective, and collectively we must turn to those men in whom joy is strongest, those men who have the art to share their joy with us.

This desire, this impulse of ours, will meet the desire and the impulse of the artists in the theatre and we shall make of it a place of worship, of worship delightful and amusing and joyous and various, so that it will become the very heart and centre of human society, from which all our activities will radiate. Just as the heart renews and purifies the blood, so will the theatre renew and purify human energy. Pure in its source, human energy is contaminated and clogged by fixed ideas, the

debased formulæ of the Church, with its exaltation of fear, and the horrid, mocking spirit of bad art, and therefore all its products are impure. There is nothing invented or contrived for the well-being of humankind but it is instantly abused. Politicians, philosophers, and reformers are for ever trying to force systems of thought, of social existence, of economics, upon human life from without, only to see them absorbed and swept along by the circular stream of exploitation. Purification can only come from within.

II

IT is the artists who have led us to this Promised Land of the twentieth century, the artists who have landed us in this chaos wherein heatedly we talk of wars and industrial strife and social injustice, the artists who step by step have dragged us up from brutal acceptance of the world's extremities of heat and cold and hunger and thirst, to the confused civilization which is the delight of the economic mind.

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There is no reason to doubt that they will lead us further yet and give us the reality rather than the dream of human brotherhood. In the meantime we have the right to ask and we do ask for as much fun by the way as can be procured. We look to the artists not only for vision but for amusement. We are so eager for it that we are over-tolerant and suffer the charlatan to deceive us rather than discard anything that is presented to us for delight. The food of our minds is more adulterated than the food of our bodies. Our large acceptivity makes it always difficult for the artist to establish his ascendancy over us, but only so and not otherwise can the artist obtain the fierce conflict within himself which shall forge his dream and his delight into such a form that it shall pass into the world's currency. Once his ascendancy is established we accept the artist's vision and have it stated and restated in a thousand different forms by minor artists and ephemeral *amuseurs* until, in the course of social evolution, we outgrow it,

and turn to a vision greater still, or, at least, to a vision set forth in terms more intelligible to our new temper.

We have outgrown the vision by which we lived in the wilderness. We are looking for new vision in everything. As we have found none in the theatre, it has lost its importance for us, even as a place of light amusement. The anarchy of the theatre has been the opportunity of the music-hall, which, during the last ten years, has been organized, rudely but generously, so that it has become, after a fashion, the vehicle of expression of the untempered genius of the race. All the best and most spontaneous acting in England is to be found in the music-hall, where the people can see the wonder of their own delight in material things. You shall see the First and Second Grave-digger in the music-halls, but in that air Hamlet cannot breathe. There is no space for brooding here, nor in these vast vulgar palaces can the spirit of tragedy or the spirit of comedy have its

dwelling.

dwelling. It is the renown more than the art of Sarah Bernhardt that fills the Coliseum. An audience is easily hypnotized by a reputation, as easily as the possessor of it. To the music-hall the people bring all their naive credulity, all their prejudice, all their superstition, and these receive good measure of fun and pathos pressed down and brimming over. ☙ The theatre cannot compete with the music-hall. It must give its audiences finer fare, the food without which the race and its civilization must perish, the food of the imagination. The imagination's appetite is not touched by the music-hall. It is the privilege of refined and disciplined artists to satisfy it. It is the highest of all human privileges, for, without imagination, a man cannot live ; he can only play at living, a game which, as it may last for sixty years, is apt to become tedious and to lead to agonies of satiety, exhaustion and profound dissatisfaction. The theatre, like the music-hall, must give pleasure, but a finer, a higher, and a keener pleasure.

It has only the same machinery to hand —that can be developed but not altered— but it must use it with more subtlety and with greater skill and cunning : it must be under the control of finer brains. To draw a rough distinction—the machinery of the music-hall may use its men, but the men of the theatre must use its machinery. The music-hall asks for no vision in its artists, who will remain caricaturists; the theatre, if it is to live, must have the service of men with vision, men with the power beautifully to share their vision with their audiences, whose spirit during the performance will be set free by the dissolution of their prejudices and superstitions, led for the space of a few hours to forgetfulness of self and sent back into life enriched by imaginative experience, in courage renewed, and therefore more capable of facing and grappling with life's responsibilities. In this sharing in a vision of beauty, in this communal confirmation of the instinctive knowledge of truth that lies deep

in the heart of every human being, consists the joy of the theatre. It is this joy that, most often subconsciously, every unspoiled and unsophisticated playgoer looks for, hopes for, and thrills to as he settles in his seat, and already, before the curtain rises, begins, out of the information supplied on the programme, to create for himself the wonderland story in which marvellously he is to live and suffer and rejoice. It is this joy that for one reason or another—(a study of the newspapers will supply them)—he is most often denied either wholly or in part. If the theatre is a place of art, as not even the most fashionable actor dares deny that it should be, it is its function to present a picture, as it were, in the round, not of that life which the playgoer can see in the streets or the law-courts or his own or his friends' houses, but an abstraction, a sublimation of life, which shall delight him first of all by intensely amusing him and then, by confirming his instinctive knowledge of life, giving the lie to the impression he

has of it through his senses and his limited capacity for experience.—(The average man's existence does not express his vitality; the artist furnishes him with another sphere in which to live, in which also to correct the mischances and distortions of his mind.)—The theatre must not be like "life": it must be like the theatre, that is, like the ideal theatre, or as near to it as the limitations of the artists in control of it will allow. In any case it should always transcend the limitations of its audience.

III

IT is often objected that the theatre cannot have the standards of the other arts since in its collective appeal it is dependent for its existence upon the capricious approbation of the public, and that it is unreasonable to expect any large body of men to understand and appreciate a work of art until it is a little swathed about with tradition and toned down with the dust of time. But it is precisely in

the

the theatre that a work of art can be most nearly approached by the ordinary mind, because it is most fondly familiar with the theatre and is there fortified by the presence of other ordinary minds all concentrated on the same object. For this reason, if the artist's vision be translated into terms of the theatre, into a fable, into symbols capable of treatment by the machinery of the theatre, there will be nothing or little in it that cannot be apprehended through the emotional response of the audience. For the artist of the theatre the essential is that he should trust his audience, as Shakespeare trusted his, and as smaller writers for the stage do not trust theirs. It is only in such trust that drama in all its degrees and forms, from tragedy down to farce and burlesque, can be created; without it there can be nothing but the ingenious manipulation of tricks and common-form situations and characters, eked out with resplendent trimmings, as in one school in the modern theatre, or, as in another, with exposition of irrelevant

ideas or criticisms of the accidental and passing phenomena of existence. In either case there must be in the audience so dealt with a sense of disproportion, for the machinery of the theatre, the vitality and mental energy in an audience, are much too great to be used for anything save the purposes of drama, which is the creation of another life beyond life and yet of it, informing it, casting back a radiance upon it and revealing, if not its purpose, at least its force and intensity. Failing, under pressure of divers necessities, to perceive this purpose, or to move towards it, the directors of the modern theatres have come to a sort of compact with their indulgent and ever-changing public, that the theatre shall be used only for laughter, in season and out. That were well enough if such laughter were provoked honestly and in sheer fun, but in the decadent theatre of London, New York and Paris real fun is far to seek and there is a grim trade in laughter, in joyless mirth, relieved only here and there

by the native drollery of some individual performer, who, relying solely upon his own personality, fighting against the soulless organization which brings him into the public view, is soon exhausted and brought either to impotence or to a dull conventionalization of his humour. And so it is with all talent, of actors and dramatists alike ; it is sacrificed to this base compact and trade in laughter. And yet there comes to the theatre a succession of new generations of playgoers, audiences potentially fine and alert, bringing to their pleasure a naive and almost joyous quality, believing in the heroes and heroines, being hypnotized by the charm and glitter of the machinery and not at all critical of the use of it that they find, finally suffering disillusion and turning away to the music-hall and to literature and the other arts. Not yet has there arisen in the theatre an artist or a band of artists strong enough to meet a new generation of playgoers and to whip their enthusiasm and delight, their desire for joy into joy, upon

the wave of which both can be carried to higher and yet higher and more magnificent achievement. Not yet. . . . But there is continual effort and continual striving, a steady stream of hope and desire. More; there is in many hearts and minds the faith that such a thing will be, faith that, once springing forth in mind and heart, never yet failed to find its way into the world of form. We are only at the beginning. We have only just entered the new region of the mind. Consider our habits, how we live. Rightly or wrongly—(and when all is told, will it not be seen to be right?)—we have gathered ourselves into great cities and huge companies of men, where we live under a constant stress and pressure of circumstances and hurried human contact, and we are engaged, each of us, in work so specialized that we cannot perceive its effect upon the whole, or, indeed, its effect upon our own existence, save that it procures us bread and living; we have made it easy to pass out of these cities,

to move from one to the other, and we have established communications with all parts of the world; our life reacts upon the lives of the nations our neighbours, upon the lives of nations once thought of dimly as barbarians, and therefore hardly kin with us at all; each day the new facts, the events of the world are presented to us; the life of the individual touches the life of humanity at so many points as to make selection and action well-nigh impossible except through habit and under the constraint of the general action. Such an existence has produced excitement, a desire to know more, an appreciation of the relation of the individual to the race, and an eagerness for better fellowship—in fine, curiosity; instinct urging every individual to fortify himself for the larger life which dimly he perceives to be opening up before him. Instinct lands the individual in strange places, but always he is seeking one thing only—vitality, with which to withstand the strain of his existence. He is

seeking genius, and he welcomes everything that helps or seems to help him to understand it and make some of it his own. There is professorial authority for saying that no man destitute of genius could live for a day. It should not be necessary to back such a statement with authority, professorial or other, so evident is its truth from each man's knowledge of himself. Yet the word "genius" has been so misappropriated and abused by quacks and charlatans that the busy layman starts from it, for he is "once bitten, twice shy" and is fearful of spontaneity in all its forms, fearful, while, in spite of himself, he craves for it. "Genius is spontaneity, the life of the soul asserting itself triumphantly in the midst of dead things." Vision is as much a natural function of man as digestion; vision is that function which raises a man above the rest of creation, and, if it be not exercised, produces the most disastrous results upon the health of body and mind. Artists are those who, by fidelity to their genius,

their vision, preserve their health, and, in so doing, help to maintain the health of the body politic and give it a standard of health. An artist is not a creature apart ; he is a human being who is human. He lives by courage where others live by fear. His free genius—free in articulation—sounds the cry of "Onward ! Upward !" to the stifled and overlaid genius in common men.

Above all things men desire health. Only genius can give it them. The peasant, the savage existence affords no sufficient expression for a man's power of life or his religious aspiration. Genius has led him to civilization, made life a finer instrument for the expression of the reality from which it springs, but has not yet taught him how to use it, how even to use that which he has so that he may not be defeated by that which he shall have hereafter, or how to make his own small life harmonious with the great Being of which it is a part.

Ordinary men are deluged day by day

with facts. They need a touchstone which can endow them with meaning, kindle them, make them pregnant with significance for each man according to his needs. To such a state of mind no man can be brought except in that mood and condition of pleasure which delights him into receptivity and pure acceptance, that mood in which he feels "smilingly from top to toe," an easy, delicious, soaring ecstasy. That he can only come by under the powerful and rare domination of art, and such domination is most easily established over him in the theatre, where he is, so to speak, abstracted from his everyday existence and forced to concentrate his mind and his senses upon one object.

Without knowing it, the modern impulse of exfoliation is taking men towards the theatre. Faith will not admit of doubt that, when they come to it, they will find it equipped and all prepared to give them the joy that they have come to seek.

Life, that succession of opportunities, has

brought us to a greater opportunity than has ever been offered to us before. We shall not fail in it or to turn it to account, though we may fail in much that we seem to perceive in our excited dreams, for always we cast our thoughts beyond what we can perform, beyond what it is meet that we should do. Ever at the extremity of our thoughts there lies a thought that we cannot interpret, though, without its light, our own do but intensify our darkness. Only through the refinement and discipline of our thoughts in art can we approach it. In the effort to procure this refinement and this discipline lies the health that all men desire.

IV

ASSUMING then that the tremendous energy now manifesting itself in human affairs is purposeful, assuming that we are something more than the victims of a blind force in eruption, that we are capable of translating into our own terms something at least of the

intentions of the Contriver of the Universe, and have organized the humbler processes of life in order that we may live it with more profit to ourselves and greater usefulness to the general plan of which we are and must ever remain in ignorance ; assuming that in this impulse there is evidence of a general desire in the civilized world to use the theatre as a place of delight and harmony and order, what is there being done in the theatre to meet that desire ? If the audiences are emerging, are the artists prepared ? Are they preparing ? Is the potential desire of the audiences attaining consciousness in them ? . . . The answer to all these questions is, I think, that in the few great dramatists of genius, in Shakespeare, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Ibsen, Molière, Lope da Vega, Tschekov, Synge, consciousness has been reached and expressed in form, while the theatre has always been so disorganized as never to give the work of any of them full value in performance. For generations now

in his own country the plays of Shakespeare have been made as dull as his own Polonius ; under Irving a pageant with a strange, interesting, and romantic figure wandering through it ; under his followers and imitators, a pageant. It is probable that the English theatre will not be able to exercise its real function until these, the greatest plays in the world, are released from the bad tradition with which they are encrusted, and already, under pressure from Russia and Germany, efforts are being made in London towards this achievement, and as the dramatist is liberated, so will the actor be thrust from the place he has usurped in the theatre's economy, from which he has checked and repressed all development even in his own branch of the art. In the theatre the interpreters have dominated the creators to such an extent that really creative men have not been suffered to enter it, and for many years now only those men have written plays who have been content to trim their work to fit the personal and

technical limitations of the modish actors of the moment, with the result that the actors have become indolent and incapable of loyalty even to those writers whom they have consented to employ. The best acting is that which most loyally serves the dramatist, and the better the dramatist the better will the acting be.

The indolence of the actor has brought about decay and an inevitable reaction, from which has arisen a functionary called the producer, whose duty it is to impose discipline upon the performance of the play, to grasp the play's imaginative idea and rhythm and to see to it that nothing in the work of actors or designers impedes its free action upon the minds of the audience. Unfortunately so many modern plays have neither imaginative idea nor rhythm that the producer is often forced to concern himself with elaboration of detail and the contrivance or "business" or mechanical devices to disguise the poverty of the action. The producer

should simplify ; under modern conditions, as a rule, he does but complicate by sacrificing the will of the dramatist to the will of the actors, or, again, where the producer becomes sufficiently powerful, he subordinates the will of both dramatist and actor to his own conception and concentrates on spectacle. It is conceivable that the producer himself might be a dramatist, capable of using the elements of the art of the theatre—sound, light, and movement—to create a drama, employing his actors only as puppets and dispensing with the written drama altogether. It is conceivable, it is desirable, and there is no reason why such a drama should not coexist with the drama that is conceived and elaborated in the study and translated into terms of the theatre through the work of producer, actors and decorators. In the house of art there are many mansions and there is room for every kind of work, for every combination of author, producer and actor, except that which delivers the theatre into the hands

of the actor, and on condition that every effort be directed towards service of the dramatic idea. Where the producer dispenses with the dramatist, it is, or should be, only because he himself is a dramatist ; but such a producer will be very rare. It might be said that an actor like Irving was his own dramatist and there would be some truth in it. Every good music-hall comedian—Mr. Harry Lauder or Mr. George Formby—is his own dramatist, as Irving was, but such men have no medium save their own personalities and cannot therefore both be themselves and not themselves, cannot use a play or other material except as an adjunct to themselves and cannot therefore use the machinery of the theatre to create an artistic whole. For such men the machinery of the music-hall has been evolved. They can charm their audiences, hypnotize them, but they cannot give them joy except their charm be brought into relation quite clearly with the dramatic idea, which is a play. ☙ The machinery of the modern music-hall

has been created for those artists who can work only in the medium of their own personalities acting directly upon the minds of their audiences without reference to anything else or to anything larger than themselves. From such men the theatre will soon be entirely delivered by the music-hall, which not only offers them greater rewards but relieves them of responsibility and gives them a more effective method of attack for their purposes. Relieved of these men, the theatre, if it is to live at all, must be served by dramatists and producers and producer-dramatists who do not themselves appear upon the stage but use it to express the ideas by which they are possessed. So conducted and only so can the theatre meet the demands made on it by J. M. Synge in his preface to "The Tinker's Wedding":

"The drama is made serious—in the French sense of the word—not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree

in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live. We should not go to the theatre as we go to a chemist's or a dram-shop, but as we go to a dinner, where the food we need is taken with pleasure and excitement.

"The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything. Analysts with their problems and teachers with their systems are soon as old-fashioned as the pharmacopœia of Galen—look at Ibsen and the Germans—but the best plays of Ben Jonson and Molière can no more go out of fashion than the blackberries on the hedges.

"Of the things which nourish the imagination, humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it."

To handle serious drama at all, to present it so that there shall be no discord between the dramatic idea and its interpretation, a theatre should be as well-disciplined as a ship, for a ship it is, indeed, one in which wondrous voyages are taken out upon the

high seas of the mind. Every theatre should be under the control of a director who is familiar with every detail of its construction, a man who, without being himself a creative artist, is immediately and subtly responsive to art. This director should be served by a number of highly trained producers, a sufficient company of actors, designers, scene-painters, machinists, dressmakers, all of whom should, by competent work, be able to earn a reasonably secure living, independently of the success of this or that performance, for, if he be harassed by financial anxiety, no man can give of his best.

Theatres roughly corresponding to these requirements are beginning to spring up in the provinces in England, in Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, also in Dublin, and there will soon be no great industrial centre in the country that has not its own theatre more or less independent of the London commercial traffic in entertainments; Russia has an admirable Art Theatre in Moscow, and in

Germany they are building in many towns small theatres for modern realistic plays and larger houses for classic and poetic drama; there are Little Theatres in Chicago and New York holding out ambitious programmes; order is beginning to shine through chaos, but still the workers in the theatre are under the tyranny of the old superstitions, still lacking courage and clear perception of the new—the age-old—spirit, still inclined to be content with success, and, when they have won it, to be fearful of losing it by carrying the idea any further—the old trouble of each revolutionary leader desiring the revolution to end in himself, so that Danton must gobble up Mirabeau, Marat Danton, Robespierre Marat, and so on, until a master comes whose tyranny may be worse than the old. The trouble in the theatre is that each ambitious revolutionary specializes and admits to his theatre only a special audience, by his fanaticism holds the general audience at arm's length, wastes energy, and in the end destroys

his

his own usefulness by raging against the barrier of his own erection, the barrier between himself and his own vision and work. And meanwhile the old enemy of artistic enthusiasm, the spirit of mockery inherent in human nature, enters into the fray and completes the work of destruction. It has been so in every effort of the human race to rise to a higher level of existence. Perhaps it is inevitable, a necessary limitation and check, a precaution to ensure that each generation shall have its allotted task and shall not find it too easy. All human activity seems to run in cycles—a romantic period of huge endeavour, a classic period of fruitfulness and peace, and a period of decadence when the race descends from its high achievement and plunges down into the lower air, only to rise to achievement higher yet. In the theatre we are at the beginning of a romantic period. The time is passing when even men of intelligence and culture will tolerate in the theatre blunders and stupidities which would

not for a moment be endured in any other art. The time is coming when the theatre will be a place of art, an exchange of ideas, the subtlest and finest engine of society, the first to feel, to express and to inform new desire, new vision, new impulse and new hope.

V

THERE is nothing new under the sun, but if the world be clearly envisaged, everything in it appears eternally new, wonderful and lovely. The future can only be built up on the present as the present is built up on the past. The difficulty in discussing any change, particular or general, is that, if the arguments for it be presented so persuasively as to carry conviction, those who are convinced begin at once to ask and to look for concrete, shapely results, and they are disappointed if there do not immediately arise a new heaven and a new earth, entirely different in quality and substance from the old, and, these never being forthcoming, they

lose heart if they are told that they will be lucky to have the change becoming perceptible in their grandchildren. This difficulty is very great in dealing with the theatre, which has fallen into such contempt that even the best of those who work in it hardly believe in it at all, and certainly have no confidence in the possibility of such audiences as would make a real theatre feasible. When the enthusiast upholds a glowing picture of the future of the theatre, and informs his thrilling auditors that it is a matter of many generations, then their hearts sink and they look back and say : " Yes, but look at all the movements of the past thirty years. They have all ended in the very thing they set out to destroy, the substitution of the standards of success for the standards of art. They have all ended by being concerned, not with the theatre, but only with its appendages and trimmings, with its outward aspect. You may change the outward aspect of a rotten thing, you have to change it for each genera-

tion, but what is the use of dragging in ideals and dreams and other irrelevancies, if the thing itself remains always the same? And after all, if things never change, is it worth all this talk and all this effort to which you are trying to lead us?" . . . To which the reply is this: "Things always remain the same until we change, and that we cannot help doing. The spirit in which we approach the world and all in it is for ever changing as we change and grow and develop new powers of life, clearer vision, and more of what Matthew Arnold called 'sweetness and light.'" Every new development that takes place within us is infallibly expressed in every one of our institutions and in the use we make of them. Not for nothing do we have men of genius. Not for nothing have we had Blake, Whitman, Nietzsche, and, in the theatre, Shakespeare, Wagner, Ibsen. Each of these men has found new joys in life and by his work has made the world free of them, at the cost of effort, a small effort compared

with the mighty struggles that first wrested these joys from life. The spirit of bold and courageous and imaginative development that animates all men of genius no more ends than it begins with them. It is as old as humanity. Through the ages it has gathered consciousness in our minds and hearts, but only here and there has it found full expression. Our institutions are for ever being adapted to give it freer scope, but they are never adapted without pain and suffering, without injury to our habits or damage to vested interests. To this spirit, to the genius of the human race, the theatre has for generations been closed. Folly and cowardice and egoism and vanity have barred the doors against it, and, for want of it, the theatre has been stricken with a sickness that seems mortal. Its old small function of giving light amusement has been taken from it. It is stretching its limbs for the exercise of its higher function of giving serious, *i.e.* imaginative amusement. It is still under the stress of revolt, so that it is diffi-

cult to see the gleams of that joy which is seeking expression in it. Hardly in Europe is there a single artist of the theatre devoted to sane, secure, delighted and delightful achievement in his art ; very few are there indeed who are beginning to shake free of the realism which for the last fifty years has seemed to kill the joy of all the arts, while in truth it has been riddling and scattering the false joy of the academies, and leaving art at rest for a long period of incubation. All art is a matter of convention, of agreement between artist and public as to the meaning of certain symbols. When the current symbols grow debased and lose their shining and luminous quality, honest artists return from their art to life, investigate it, analyse it, mark its progress, to discover why the old symbols have lost their meaning. Such a period is a kind of winter : plays, novels, pictures, music, are used as a sort of seed-bed, in which hundreds and thousands of germs are planted from which in the spring—the

new growth of art—only the healthiest stocks will be selected. It has been finely said: "Why weep over the ruins of art? They are not worth it. Art is the shadow man casts on nature. . . . From time to time, a genius, in passing contact with the earth, suddenly perceives the torrent of reality overflowing the continents of art. The dykes crack for a moment. Nature creeps in through a fissure. But at once the gap is stopped up. It must be done to safeguard the reason of mankind. It would perish if its eyes met the eyes of Jehovah. Then once more it begins to strengthen the walls of its cell, which nothing enters from without except it have first been wrought upon." . . . Just as without habit a man cannot but go mad, so without convention an artist cannot shape his inspiration into a definite image for the minds of his audience, and just as a man becomes the slave of his habits, so an artist may become the slave of his conventions, and his work, reaching the other extremity, becomes mean-

ingless. In revolt against the tyranny of old conventions an artist is too much beset by moods of self-distrust to be able to win through to the mood of serenity in which works of art alone are possible. But, in the force of his revolt, he may achieve works valuable in destructive quality, or in the marshalling of detail, or even in the opening up of some new way along which the mind can travel; yet all such work cannot be presented to a general audience, for it has not the basis of trust and confidence upon which artists and audiences can meet. Such work will often achieve a sort of success of fashion, but it can never achieve the success of art, which has hardly a worse enemy than fashion with its snobbism and sheepish insincerity. Whether it succeeds or no, sincere work is always valuable, and in the European theatre there is abundance of such busy, sincere, intelligent work as to justify the most ardent hopes that at last the sleeping giant of the drama is stirring to his waking hour.

The French are a great analytical people, the testers of ideas and inspirations. It was a Frenchman, Edouard Manet, who began the liberation of modern painting from the dominion of the conventions of the schools. It was a Frenchman, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, who was the greatest and most vigorous of the early deliverers of the drama from its captivity. It was a Frenchman also in whom the impulse that has found its expression in the dancing of Isadora Duncan, the Russian Ballet, and the Eurhythmics of M. Jacques Dalcloze, first reached consciousness. The intellectual force of the one, the instinctive and emotional force of the other, have produced two great streams of activity in the theatre, the realistic and the spectacular, both of which are at present engaging the attention of Mr. Granville Barker in London, Herr Max Reinhardt in Berlin, M. Rouché in Paris, and, the greatest of all, Stanislawski in Moscow. In the English-speaking world the dramatic work of Mr. Bernard Shaw,

Mr. John Galsworthy and Mr. Granville Barker, fortified by the Irish school inspired by Yeats and Synge, has led to the establishment of Repertory Theatres in the English provinces, and of Little Theatres in New York and Chicago. The Art Theatre in Moscow is devoted chiefly to the production of realistic plays, like those of Tschekov and Gorky, but this theatre has also the distinction of being the first to have a Shakespearean production by Mr. Gordon Craig, with his newest ideas and his screens. Germany is perhaps better equipped than any country in the number of its advanced theatres and in their scientific erection and their furnishing to meet modern requirements.

Still, with all this business, with all these manifestations of vitality, the theatre is only on the point of emerging. It is still far from taking its rightful place in the life of the civilized world. Its art is still, as it were, suspended between life and the old conventions of the theatre. The dramatists are still

too

too timid, too self-conscious, to stand on their own feet as dramatists, to do their work for its own sake, and, with the exception of a few young men who are groping their way to a poetic drama, they seek to fortify their plays by writing them with reference to the problems and the passing ideas and excitements of the day, and to each and every suggestion for the amelioration of life, without considering whether these things tend to the improvement of their art. The intellectual position of the artist is and will be for many years too perilous for him to take the *salto mortale* beyond thought and beyond analysis up to the region in which works of art spring into being, and in his immediate predecessors there has not been any achievement solid enough to have laid the suspicions of the public and dissipated his own distrust of himself and so with irresistible force to urge him with easy, confident mastery of himself to mould his material into form. In the theatre proper in this country there has as yet been

no work done that can be regarded as free of the defects inevitable in a period of attack and reconstruction,—want of form, want of humour, want of serenity—no work that really reaches and feeds the imagination of the people and gives them both a feeling of security and a footing in the new world of art, to the opening up of which so many good lives have been given. From the opera, however, from the opera turning to spectacle, has come work which really is achievement, work in which the modern impulses have had the freest play to create in the theatre, in artists and audience, the nearest approach to the joy of the world's seeking that has yet been forthcoming. Painting and music are without doubt the healthiest of the arts in modern Europe. In the Russian Ballet, these two arts, at their most advanced, have been admitted to the theatre and turned most richly to account in the service of its idea, its purpose. Not all the productions of the Russians have been satisfying, but in " Petrouchka," thanks

to the genius of Stravinsky and Fokin, painting and music, interpreting and being interpreted by dancing and miming, have been led in marvellous proportion to serve the central dramatic idea. In "Petrouchka" everything serves, nothing impinges upon the effect of the whole. It is shapely, clear, forceful and dynamic. It shows, better than any other piece of work of the last ten years, the capacity of the theatre as an instrument of art, and, also, in its almost perfection, how near we are to reaping the fruits of the efforts of those who have devoted their energies to the theatre's redemption. Most usefully might "Petrouchka" be compared to "Coppélia." Each is excellent of its kind, but there is as much difference between them as there is between Gluck and Offenbach, or between a magnificently ordered dinner and a meal of sweetmeats. The one inspires, the other charms. The one exists by its own inspiration, the other is referable back to other works of art in the same kind. Both are the

histories of dolls, but " Petrouchka " gains in intensity as a criticism of life by so being ; the other is not far from remaining altogether in the world of inanimate and contrived things. The one deals with life at first hand, translating it almost perfectly into symbols, while the other deals with symbols so familiar that their power to reflect life is dimmed.

The Russian Ballet, passing from capital to capital, has given the workers in the theatre the inspiration and the revelation that they needed to lift them beyond their experiments in realism and analysis, and it has given a new zest to the public by providing them with a pleasure keener than any that has been known in the theatre for generations, a pleasure so keen that critics and public are beginning a little unjustly to ask if there is really any greater merit in the politico-intellectual realism of the modern school than in the clever trickery of Scribe and Sardou. But, after a period of decadence and inanition, art must force its way back to life before

it can be infused with the vitality necessary for its new flight towards the truth. It can only do so slowly, laboriously, painfully, forcing its way through or under the thousand and one obstacles, often taking the most surprising turns and using the most unexpected means. Art, like life, is not reasonable. Like life, it turns even decay to profit. Through the most devious ways the art of the theatre has forced its way back from exile into the theatre, bringing with it colour and music and painting and dancing, intelligence, proportion, imagination, poetry, the courageous desire and hope of all artists to serve the drama and to assist in laying before the world such a feast of joy and loveliness as men have hardly ventured to dream of before. Best of all is the knowledge through the Russian Ballet that the world is prepared to rejoice in the feast and to ask for more and more of it, all as rich and varied and life-giving as possible. ❧ At the risk of being tiresome, it must be repeated that the feast will not, cannot, be

new in substance. The human race has many thousands of years yet to live before it can reach a spirit, a quality of genius, higher than that of Shakespeare or Sophocles or any man of supremity, but, whereas, in the past, the feast of art has been spread out over immense spaces of time, often over many generations, now, since a larger proportion of men are admitted to art, there will be in any one generation sufficient desire, sufficient aspiration and ardour, for the whole feast to be laid before them. That there will be sufficient articulate genius to supply the demand cannot be doubted, for there is enough unexplored and uninterpreted genius in Shakespeare alone to keep many generations in active delight. But the seeming swifter passage of time—(due to life's greater fullness)—must necessitate in the theatre finer efficiency and skill in those men of talent whose work it is to state and restate in a thousand different forms the divination and the achievement of genius. It is this greater efficiency in the men of talent, in

their more sensitive response to the animating spirit of the art they serve—the actors, the producers, the decorators—that will make the most obvious difference between the new theatre and the old, for in their harmonious co-operation they will bring forth the joy that is now latent in the theatre, the joy that is in every good play, every sincere piece of acting, every genuine design, the joy which unfortunately is now obscured by the dislocation of the theatre's machinery, as the result of which nothing is ever *placed* or ever wrought to its finest form, and everything is sacrificed to individual caprice or commercial rapacity. For all that, there is so little between the theatre as it is and the theatre as it might be, that a puff of wind, a favourable accident, a sudden turn of popular favour could at any moment cause it to veer round and show its true face to the world. Until that has happened, in spite of all the honest endeavour and earnest effort of the workers in it, the theatre can only continue to live

the stealthy and rather parasitical life to which it has been condemned by modern civilization.

VI

THE art of the theatre is a combination of many arts fused by the dramatic sense, without which the result of combination can only be a compromise as dull as that of any club or society of men which has lost all perception and sense of the idea which originally brought them together. Without the dramatic sense, the result of such combination of the arts can only appear in something less than each art separately ; like a committee, the intelligence of which is that of its least intelligent member divided by the number of its constituents. Not every artist has the dramatic sense, which I can but roughly define as an instinctive power to divine and lead and merge into one entity, through the delight his skill can give to their senses, the collective vitality of an audience. He is a man of the theatre in whom this power is

sufficiently developed for him to use and control it to do his will. To such a man nothing is necessary save a stage and an audience. What he puts upon the stage, whatever combination of sound, light and movement, will be so manipulated as to be recognizably a play, that is, a microcosm altogether separate from the universe outside and yet containing in its essence, distilled and concentrated, all that the human mind can perceive of the wonder, the power, and the glory of the mysterious authority that lies at the heart of all things. If the artist in the theatre has not this sense, he can develop a sense of the theatre and learn dexterously to fob his audience off with tricks and to lead them to find amusement in solemn travesty. Between these two processes there is becoming ever more apparent a differentiation as sharp and yet as difficult to define as that between journalism and literature. These two processes can hardly avoid being hostile to each other, but, within

the theatre, there should soon be an end of stupid quarrels as to what kind of play is best and right, and we should attain a generous temper to admit that all kinds of play are good, if only they be well written, well produced, well acted. Good plays make good actors and good audiences. When an audience rises from a good play, it always declares that it is the best play it has ever seen. Dramatists should see to it that there is rather more than less truth in this impression. Audiences never know whether they have been delighted with the play or with the acting; they do not know where one ends and the other begins, and there is no reason why they should. They go to the theatre to procure delight; if they get it in any considerable quantity, they go again. If not, not. It is an old saying that all things are possible for the man who does not ask for credit or rewards for what he does. This is true, and the theatre will not be restored to health until dramatists and actors are content to take the fun of their work as its chief reward.

The theatre is the creation of the story-telling instinct joining hands with the rhythmic instinct out of which came the dance. The ordinary mind approaches art through story-telling and seeks to attach a story to every picture, every piece of music, that pleases it. If the theatre is to live in a democratic community it must be prepared to meet the ordinary mind in this way. In the theatre pictures, music, dancing, as many arts as can be usefully employed, are attached to a story and woven into it to give to the mind of the spectator a glorification of his own visions of and emotions concerning life. At its barest, the theatre shows the common man his own vision familiarly, without elevation or depth. —(The corner-shop widow finds melodrama "true to life.")—But the story-telling instinct seeks something beyond experience, always something marvellous; it seeks experience kindled by imagination. It is because of this constant demand for imagination and the rejection of everything that falls short of it that

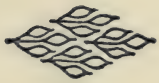
the best plays survive, while ingenious contrivances masquerading as plays are like the fashion upon which they come into being—they live but for a day and thereafter cannot escape ridicule.

The essential in the theatre is that dramatic unity which can only be achieved by dignity and sincerity resulting in the simplicity which is the stamp of art. Once this unity has been perceived, once the joy of it has been tasted, no man can be content with anything that falls short of it, or at least of aiming at it. It is precisely in the theatre that this joy can be made accessible to all men.

The conclusion of the matter is this, that out of the confusion of the theatre the drama is beginning to emerge. In England we have the finest drama in the world upon which to build. By the activity of the theatre in Europe, in almost every country, we are being forced to take stock of our heritage and to rescue it from the accumulation of

false tradition beneath which we have allowed it to be buried. Much of the work of excavation has been done, and it will soon be possible to create a drama and a theatre worthy of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Congreve and Sheridan, a theatre which shall give back to the world in masterpieces old and new the joy from which, in its fear and shame, it has for too long turned away. Through this joy there shall breathe again such a spirit of delight as shall at last justify the great democracies of the modern world. The theatre which in the past has, in Shelley, Browning, Dickens, Meredith, rejected so much genius, will become the home of genius, the temple to which men of genius and talent, whatever their craft, may turn in the certain hope of finding a welcome and freedom and space in which to work in their task of revealing the world in all its glory to their fellow-men.

E pur si muove



Printed at The Ballantyne Press
London 1913

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